MILTON AND OVID

A STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF OVID AND HIS RENAISSANCE EDITORS AND COMMENTATORS ON MILTON'S POETRY

BY

DAVIS PHILOON HARDING

A.B., George Washington University, 1937

A.M., University of Illinois, 1941

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1943

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MAY 3 1943

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Professor Harris Fletcher, who directed me to this study and supervised its writing, I wish to express my gratitude for his patience, advice, and encouragement. Other friends and teachers have given me assistance in various ways. Mr. Edwin Winslow Robbins read proof on the typescript in its final state. Professor Thomas Whitfield Baldwin directed me to much that may be of value in the chapter on Milton at St. Paul's. The criticisms and suggestions of Associate Professor Marvin Theodore Herrick and Nigel Hill Herrick have been at all times most helpful—though often grudgingly received. Finally, I am thoroughly appreciative of the aid accorded me by the staff of the University of Illinois Library, especially Miss Isabelle Grant and Miss Marian Harman, in assembling the materials of research.

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The aim of this study is to discover the influence of Ovid in his Renaissance form on Milton's poetry. During the sixteenth century, edition after edition of Ovid's works came off the presses of continental Europe, especially from those at Venice and Basle, in a seemingly endless flow. Hence, the material had to be limited, and in this thesis the author has confined himself largely to studying the influence on Milton of the Renaissance editions of the *Metamorphoses*. Furthermore, no attempt has been made to deal with the whole influence of Ovid on Milton, since that would involve the needless repetition of too much material. In the last two hundred years, Milton's indebtedness to the classical Ovid has been frequently and thoroughly investigated. The present study is to be considered a supplement to those investigations.

Milton's relationship to Ovid throughout the years of his life was affected by two factors: the poet's warmly emotional nature and his poetic ambition. The second factor did not become fully operative until about 1629. In the meantime, there was nothing to impede the normal development of Milton's youthful literary enthusiasms. One of the first of these enthusiasms was for the poetry of Ovid. In a young man of Milton's temperament, this was entirely natural. He has too often been described as "cold" by nature. Nothing could be further from the truth. "Milton's temper," Professor Herford justly observes, "was not cold but ardent: his asceticism was the passionate and immoderate self-control of one by nature impelled to love." Something in this warm, passionate nature responded powerfully to the stimulus of Ovid's glowing and facile verse. Milton himself tells us, in a statement that is at once an apology and a vindication, that in his youth he found the style and matter of the Roman elegiac poets "most agreeable to natures part in me."

At St. Paul's School, where he seems to have been a pupil from his eighth to his sixteenth year, the study of Ovid's poetry normally began in the Third Form. The commonly-received opinion that Milton was not admitted to St. Paul's until 1620, or when he was twelve years old, rests upon an incorrect interpretation by Masson of a statement in Anthony Wood's *Fasti*. The most probable date for his admission to St. Paul's would seem to be in the spring of 1617. The part which this school must have played in fostering and cultivating Milton's early enthusiasm for Ovidian verse cannot be enough emphasized. In Renaissance grammar schools, Ovid's verse was the model by which the school-boys were taught the rules of verse-making. Later, they were required to write poems imitat ing Ovid as closely as possible. Unless one is familiar with the seventeenth century teaching manuals of John Brinsley and Charles Hoole, it is hard to appreciate the thoroughness with which grammarians of Milton's day were expected to know their Ovid. It is no exaggeration to say that they had to know him virtually by heart. The training in versification was also very rigorous. Although Brinsley and Hoole list many "aids to versifying," it is the close study and imitation of Ovid and Virgil which they recommend as the best means of arriving at excellence in poetry. To this end the boys were required to make Latin verses out of Ovid or Virgil, being careful, to quote Brinsley, "euer to keepe the very phrase of the Poet, there or in other places, onely transposing the words or phrase, or changing some word or phrase, or the numbers or persons, or applying them to matters which are familiar . . ." The grammarian who could most skilfully "vary" a phrase from Ovid or Virgil was sure to be put near the head of his Form.

At Cambridge, in deference to a long-standing tradition that the educated gentleman should compose elegant Latin verse in the Ovidian manner, Milton gave free rein to his passion for Ovid. The Latin elegies written while Milton was an undergraduate attest the thoroughness of his training in versification at St. Paul's. On these poems he brings to bear all the mechanical devices of imitation he had learned in grammar school. So successfully does he imitate his master Ovid in several of his elegies that the copy might easily be taken for the original. Milton's indebtedness to Ovid is even greater than the annotated

editions of his *Latin Poems* indicate. By consulting the Renaissance editions of Ovid, it has been possible to point out instances of Milton's indebtedness to Ovid which have not hitherto been noticed by Milton's editors. This tendency of Milton's editors to forget that Milton was a Renaissance poet, writing Renaissance (and not classical) Latin, reading Renaissance editions, and using Renaissance dictionaries, has been a drawback to our complete understanding of Milton's Latin poems. Words which in classical Latin had one meaning, frequently, by the period of the Renaissance, developed new shades of meaning, or sometimes had changed in meaning altogether. Examples of such shifts in meaning have been cited in the chapter devoted to Ovid's influence on Milton's Latin poems. Consequently, the only standards by which Milton's verse may be fairly tried and evaluated are Renaissance standards.

Sometime in the neighborhood of his twenty-first birthday, Milton definitely resolved to become an epic poet. Such a resolution was certain to bring about a drastic readjustment in Milton's relationship to Ovid. A young man intending to become a Christian Homer had need of other models than the *Ars Amotoria* and the *Amores*. After 1629-30, for all the apparent influence they have on Milton's poetry, Ovid's love poems might almost never have been written. The *Metamorphoses,* however, seems never to have lost its hold on Milton's affection. He would have been familiar with its contents—not only with the fables themselves but also "with the moralitie therein couched," as the schoolmaster Charles Hoole puts it—at least by the time he finished his fourth year at St. Paul's. Alone of all Ovid's poetry, the *Metamorphoses* continued to exert an important influence on Milton after the resolution of 1629-30. It remained to the end of Milton's life one of his favorite books. Dr. Johnson says: "The books in which his daughter who used to read to him, represented him as most delighting, after Homer, which he could almost repeat, were Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Euripides."

To appreciate the full influence of the *Metamorphoses* on Milton's poetry, it is as essential to know the Renaissance interpretation of Ovid's fables as it is to know the fables themselves. The mask *Comus* exemplifies this important fact. In *Comus* Milton celebrates the theme of virtue's triumph over sensuality,

basing much of his plot incident on the myth of Ulysses and Circe, as it was told by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*—and not by Homer. A knowledge of the *Metamorphoses*— in its Renaissance form, with textual and exegetical commentary attached directly to the text—also helps explain the nature of Milton's indebtedness to Ovid in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's account of Creation illustrates the method he followed in borrowing from Ovid. Being a literalist—that is, believing that the text of Scripture was sacred—Milton was obliged to observe the limitations imposed by the accounts of Creation in the first two books of *Genesis*. But these accounts were ambiguous and vague enough in certain places to allow him considerable latitude. Very little, for example, is said in *Genesis* of the mode of existence prior to Creation or of the precise nature and limits of the cosmos created. To fill out his conception of Creation, Milton fell back upon several sources, including the famous description in the *Metamorphoses*. The *Metamorphoses*, in its traditional Renaissance form, served Milton as a supplementary source to the Bible and related material in his description of Creation. It fulfills a similar function in Milton's accounts of Paradise and the Flood, as my chapter on Ovid's influence on *Paradise Lost* demonstrates in detail.

The influence of the Christian *Metamorphoses* on *Paradise Lost* is also felt in other ways. Thus, Milton is indebted to the traditional Christian interpretation of Ovid's Scylla-myth (but not to the myth itself, as is commonly assumed) for the suggestion which led him to model his figures of Sin on Scylla. Two other Christianized myths may have contributed to Milton's portrayal of Satan. In Biblical allegories based on the fables of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's Typhon and Phaeton had both, at one time or another, been identified with Satan. This identification probably accounts for the fact that, though Milton makes no direct use of the allegories themselves, he does borrow at just the appropriate places in *Paradise Lost* certain details from the Typhon and Phaeton myths.

With the writing of *Paradise Lost*, Ovid's influence on Milton may properly be said to have come to an end. In neither *Paradise Regained* nor *Samson Agonistes* is there more than a

shadowy trace of indebtedness to Ovid. What caused the influence to cease so abruptly? Although Milton had renounced the love poetry of Ovid early in his career, The *Metamorphoses* had remained an important influence on Milton's poetry all the way up to, and including, *Paradise Lost.* Furthermore, according to Dr. Johnson, the *Metamorphoses* was one of the three books which Milton most frequently asked to have read to him in his old age. The answer involves the larger issue of Milton's changing attitude toward pagan myth of any description, regardless of authorship.

Although the chief value of a study such as this may lie as much in its method as in its results, the results themselves have been encouraging, completely justifying the method. The examination of Renaissance editions and commentaries of the *Metamorphoses* has revealed many previously unnoticed instances of Milton's indebtedness to Ovid. These editions, furthermore, have proved unexpectedly helpful in indicating just why Milton borrowed what he did. Through a study of them, Milton's artistic method has been brought into sharper focus. Undoubtedly, the further study of the Renaissance editions of Ovid, not only of the *Metamorphoses* but of his other works as well, would contribute still more to our understanding of the whole influence of Ovid on Milton.

VITA

Davis Philoon Harding was born in Spokane, Washington, on July 11, 1914. He received his elementary schooling in various American schools and in the Tientsin Grammar School in Tientsin, China. In 1932 he was graduated from the Phillips Exeter Academy at Exeter, New Hampshire. Following a year of newspaper work, he enrolled in George Washington University, Washington, D. C. This University granted him the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1937. In the fall of 1940 he entered the Graduate School of the University of Illinois as a Scholar in English, receiving the degree of Master of Arts in June, 1941. From 1941 to 1943 he continued work toward his doctorate as a Graduate Fellow in English of the University of Illinois. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi.